

Summer in the Psalms: Finding Peace in Trying Times

Psalm 4
ABC 6/26/22

Martin Luther said the Psalms *might well be entitled a Little Bible, wherein everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully & briefly comprehended*. To learn the psalms is to learn about every area of theology: Anthropology, theology proper, bibliology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, & eschatology are all covered in them. The psalms provide a thorough exposure to all theology.¹ Beyond that, it was the hymnal of not only the Jews, but of Jesus Himself. If you have a favorite psalm let me know & we'll try to get to it this summer.

Psalm 3 & 4 are known as morning & evening psalms. Ps 3:5 says, **I awoke, for the Lord sustains me**. In Ps 4:8 we read, **in peace I will both lie down & sleep**. We looked at Ps 3 two weeks ago & today we'll look at the 4th Psalm.

You've all heard the story about a man who was candidating at a church. He preached a sermon that everyone in the church loved. As a result, he was voted in to be their new pastor. To the surprise of everyone, on his 1st Sunday as their pastor, he preached the same sermon. They were even more surprised the next week when he preached the same sermon again.

So the elders met with him to find out why he'd preached the same sermon 3x. He said, *When you start living out this sermon, I'll go on to my next one*.

This morning, I feel like that preacher. I'm preaching much the same sermon as I did last time. This is again a *life-is-difficult-&things-are-hard-but-I'm-going-to-find-my-peace-in-the-Lord* sermon.

This was the message of Ps 3 & this is the message of Ps 4. Both were written in a time of trouble & distress & both speak of the comfort & peace that David found in God. This has led many to believe that Psalms 3 & 4 were written when David was fleeing from Absalom. We know that's true of Ps 3 & it may be true of Ps 4. But maybe not. We have no way of knowing. Unlike Ps 3, this one doesn't have a superscription about the events bringing about this Psalm. It simply says, **For the choir director; on stringed instruments. A Psalm of David**. This tells us this Psalm is appropriate for public worship, to be sung. It also tells us the mood of the Psalm in that it's to be played, **on stringed instruments**. It isn't to be played on trumpets & tambourines which would be more appropriate for festive occasions. But the tone of this Psalm is more like a lament, a cry to God, & the instruments

¹ Joe Holland, www.reformation21.org/blogs/a-psalmsinging-resurgence.php

should be appropriate for the message. We're also told David wrote it, but it gives us no details about the circumstances surrounding it. As you think back over David's life, this psalm could describe several situations in his life. Maybe it was during his years of persecution at the hands of Saul (1 Sam 24, 26). Or maybe it was when the Amalakites came & destroyed the city of Ziklag. Those who survived were so disillusioned with David, they threatened to stone him (1 Sam 30:6). These would fit the trouble David describes in Ps 4. There are others that would fit as well. The bottom line is we don't know the circumstances surrounding the writing of this psalm. & that's OK. It leaves it open to the troubling times in our lives. The message of Ps 3 & 4 is the same: Though trouble is all around you, you can find your safety, security, peace, & rest in God. If you're currently in some trial, this psalm should be a balm for your soul. If you're not going through a trial right now, this psalm is important for you to learn because some trial is coming your way. The time to learn these things is before the trials come. DA Carson puts it this way: *It's important to try to establish Christian structures of thought that are already 'givens' before pain & bereavement strike.... Part of what I teach to congregations is with the aim that more Christians will be better prepared for suffering when it comes.*² Look with me at **1-2**.

1. Cries of Anguish We see 2 cries of anguish in these vss. The 1st is addressed to God, the 2nd to those who are troubling David. Vs 1 is a plea to God for help. *Answer me! Be gracious to me! Hear my prayer!* Vs 2 is an expression of exasperation. *How long? How long?* These are the cries of a desperate man. David has no doubt that even when he's in a tight spot that God can & will hear & listen. David knew God was his only help which is where the psalm also ends. It closes with, **You alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety** (8). David was in trying & troubling times & turned to God. He pleaded that God would come & rescue him from his trouble. He's unburdening himself to his God who cares for Him. He expects God to answer his prayer, to come through again & help him out of this tight spot. David has a bold confidence in God, that God would listen & answer his prayer.

Timothy Keller tells the story of Alexander the Great, who supposedly had a leading general whose daughter was getting married. Alexander said he'd be happy to contribute to the wedding. He said

² *How Long, O Lord*, p 110

he knew it would be expensive, so just ask for something. The general wrote out a request for an enormous, ridiculous sum. When Alexander's treasurer saw it, he brought it to Alexander & said, *I'm sure you're going to be cutting this man's head off now for what he's done. The audacity of asking for something like this! Who does he think you are?*

Alexander said, *Give it to him. By such an outlandish request, he shows he believes that I'm both rich & generous.* He was flattered by it.³

God desires prayer that is boldly humble & humbly bold. When you read the prayers of the Bible, they're like that. Jesus talked about it as asking, seeking, & knocking (Mt 7:7-8). David cries, **Answer me when I call.** David isn't claiming his own merit to be heard. He prays to the **God of my righteousness.** **Righteousness** has a legal background & can mean acquittal or a declaration of innocence or deliverance. **God of my righteousness** implies not only that God is righteous & will do what is best (*my righteous God*), but also that David's righteousness came from God & therefore God should vindicate him (*God of my innocence*). David believes that, regardless of his own innocent suffering, God will act triumphantly on behalf of his servant. God is righteous in Himself, but His righteousness is expressed as He relates to His people, as a Father to His children. He's promised them His presence & victory over circumstances. Faith in God's righteousness is based on God's promise that He'll come to the rescue of His children in need (Ps 25:4-5; Is 45:13). Calling boldly on God is a privilege that belongs to His children. It's to this end that the psalmist calls on God as **God of my righteousness.** He then reflects upon God's goodness to him in the past. **You have relieved me in my distress,** past tense. This could be translated, *In a tight corner, you have made room for me.* This is a psalm for any of us who are finding ourselves in a tight spot. It could be that right now you're in a tight spot where you feel hemmed in & trapped. You don't have a lot of options for getting out. You feel constricted, restricted, closed in, with nowhere to turn. The idea of being given room to move, as David says here, is liberating. & yet, it's tempting for us to run from God in these moments in doubt & say, *God, I thought you loved me. How could You let this happen to me? I've followed & obeyed You. I don't deserve this!* How easy it is to bring God into the court of our judgment & judge Him as unwise, unfaithful, & unloving. Don't do that. Instead, like David, think back to the times when God heard & helped you. Doing this gives hope for the

³ Darryl Dash, <https://dashhouse.com/2011724a-prayer-for-tight-spots-psalm-4-html/>

future. *God has cared for me in the past so I know He'll do so again.* David's heart runs to God & says, *You've answered me in the past; You've delivered me in the past; You will answer me now.* What a remarkable response, one we can & should have as well. When you're crying out to God don't forget to reflect on the ways He's delivered you in the past. Thank Him for that & trust He'll do it again. David pleads that God would be **gracious** to him & **hear** his **prayer**. When the unthinkable comes your way, when things you would never have chosen invade your life, where does your heart run? Do you run to God or away from Him? There's the cry to God. But, the cry in this psalm isn't only to God. David has a cry to men as well. 2

O sons of men is a reference to leaders, those in authority, those with wealth, influence, & prominence. David's asking questions about those who are slandering him. He doesn't just focus on the damage they're doing to his name & reputation. He charges them with loving empty words & seeking after lies. David was the king, deserving honor, just as we're to honor those in authority over us (1 Pt 2:17). But David's honor was being turned into shame, **How long will my honor become a reproach?** These people are pursuing worthless & deceptive things, all with the intent to shame David. The questions of vs 2 aren't really questions as much as they're prayers. These words are addressed to the **sons of men**, but they cried to God. It's a call saying, *How long, God, will you allow this to go on?* **How long** indicates the sufferer has been long in his pain & sees no end in sight. He appeals to God's pity, suggesting that *enough is enough*. In your pain & trouble, God may seem to stand afar off (Ps 10:1). It may seem your trials will never end. But, as here & in many of the psalms, God has it under control. He's worthy of being trusted. That's the point of the next vss. We go from the cries of anguish (1-2) to the...

2. Conduct of the Godly 3-6

David reminds himself, those causing him pain, & us that **the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself** (3). In other words, those who have been set apart by God & for God are under the watchful care of God. Though trials & troubles of all sorts will come our way, God knows when His children are suffering & why they're suffering. Sometimes we forget we're God's child, the children of the most high God through Jesus. We are **in Christ**; that's our identity. Our identity isn't in our spouse,

our job, our political affiliation, our appearance, talents, health, financial stability, nor that we're a member of ABC. Our identity should be in the Lord. Trials are made all the more troubling when the thing you've placed your identity in isn't God. Perhaps that's why a loving God allows trials in our lives, because those trials will call us back to realize our identity, meaning, purpose, & peace is in the Lord & the Lord alone. David had become king by the sovereign choice of God, not by man's authority or popular opinion. Therefore, he couldn't be attacked with immunity. In our case, the statement is a reminder that we've been brought into the company of God's people by God's choice & actions, not our own. If God has set us apart for Himself, He'll obviously not abandon us but stick by us. As Paul writes, **He (God) who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus** (Phil 1:6). Jesus said that a sparrow doesn't fall to the ground without God taking notice (Mt 10:29-31). How much more does He notice when His own children are enduring trials. I think we all know this. But David says we really need to know this. **Know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself.** Be firmly convinced that your soul is safe in God. Where do you find your identity? Is it in the Lord? I'm not talking theologically, I'm talking functionally, practically, where the rubber-meets-the-road. Every day, do you realize you've been set apart by God Himself for God Himself. Because of that, He'll hear your prayer. **The Lord hears when I call to Him** (3). The obvious question is this, *Has God set you apart?* In other words, are you the godly one of vs 3? Is your hope & trust in God? Have you come to faith in Jesus, the only way to God? Have you entrusted your soul to Him? Are you trusting Him in the midst of your trials? This is David's point. *Yes, I'm in anguish! Yes, great trials are in my life! No, this isn't fun. But I know these things haven't escaped the notice of my God. I know I'm one of His & I'll trust Him through these difficult times.* David's name is being dragged through the mud. His honor has been turned to shame. It probably looks like everyone has abandoned him. But David reminds his enemies that God hasn't turned His back. God's answer may be slow, & He may not answer as you think you want Him to answer. But if you're one of His children, if you've come to faith in Jesus, He hears your cries. He listens to you. So trust Him with His answer. It may not be what you want or expect. But who are you to tell God what to do? Yes, pour out your heart to Him. State your requests. Seek for an answer from God.

But, in the end, trust Him. That's what the godly one does. God knows who you are. He has set you apart for Himself. God hears your prayers. In the midst of the cries of anguish, the conduct of the godly will follow the ways of God even when they're difficult & mysterious. William Cowper's hymn, *God Moves in A Mysterious Way* captures this beautifully & conveys the idea of vs 4 beautifully. Look it up & read &/or sing it. 4

The word translated **tremble** comes from a word that describes being agitated, stirred up, or shaken. It may mean trembling with fear or shaking with anger (as the LXX translates it & as Paul seemingly quotes in Eph 4:26). Both are legitimate. The 1st makes the most sense to me in the context. David's trembling with fear because of the troubles surrounding him. But he reminds himself to not sin even in his fearful trembling. **Tremble, & do not sin.** Fear of your circumstances? Yes. Doubting the ways of God? Absolutely not. Understanding the ways of the God? No. Trusting in the ways of the God? Yes. **Meditate in your heart upon your bed, & be still** (4b). Go to sleep at night thinking on the mysterious ways of God, trusting in His plan for your life, even when it doesn't match up with everything you wanted. I'm sure David wanted these troubles over & to again receive the honor he deserved as king. But that wasn't what David was experiencing. His enemies were trying to take away his honor & he was troubled & hurting. David not only runs to God instead of running away from Him, he not only reminds himself of his identity in the Lord, he also examines his own heart. It's easy in trials to be so focused on your suffering that you're not paying attention to what's going on in your heart in the midst of it. Is bitterness creeping in? Anger at others or at God? What about pride? Does that play a part? If you're angry in the middle of your circumstances & claim to believe in a sovereign God, your anger is with God. We probably don't shake our fist in God's face & express that anger, but in other ways we show it. **Meditate ... be still.** *Ponder in your heart while in your bed & be silent.* You know how hard it is to be silent in trying times. Instead we complain. *I don't like this. I don't deserve this.* It's very hard when you're in a place you don't like & still have to deal with. In the busyness of life, perhaps the only time to really be still & think is in bed. It's not a bad thing. We must make time to meditate upon the Lord & His ways & examine our own hearts before God. You may be here today facing your own cries of anguish. Your problems

seemingly go on & on. God may appear distant. Heaven may seem silent. But remember the conduct of the godly. If you're God's child through Jesus, He knows your circumstances better than you do. He hears your prayers & calls you to trust Him. David may not have liked nor understood his circumstances. But through it all, David was trusting in the Lord. 5

Not only does he run to God, not only does he remind himself of his identity in the Lord, not only does he examine his heart, but David turns his heart toward worship. When you're in difficulty, do you want to worship? What are **sacrifices of righteousness**? It either means to offer sacrifices according to the proper ritual or to offer sacrifices in the right frame of mind. Maybe it means both since the appropriate sacrifice, to be acceptable, must be the outward sign of true inward motivation. Unlike David, we live on the other side of Christ's cross. We have no need to go to the temple, sacrifice a lamb, sprinkle its blood on the altar, & burn it's flesh before the Lord. But we can still offer sacrifices today. The writer of Hebrews says, **Through Him then, that's Jesus, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. & do not neglect doing good & sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (13:15-16).** The worship of God & service to others are our modern-day sacrifices. These are sacrifices we can make, even in troubling times, in which God is well-pleased. As we worship the Lord with clean hands & pure hearts, sanctified through the blood of His son, & as we love our neighbor as ourselves, even in the midst of trouble, we live as God's children ought to live. We see the contrast of the godly & the ungodly in vs 6.

There were many doubters in David's day who weren't trusting God. They were saying, **Who will show us any good?** These are like the mockers of Ps 3:2, **Many are saying of my soul, 'There is no deliverance for him in God.'** Maybe these are those experiencing the same troubles as David. Perhaps they're the ones causing David's troubles in the 1st place. We don't know. But we do know they are those who have lost faith. They have no patience when God doesn't seem to answer.

There are 2 ways to take the 2nd half of vs 6. 1st, it may be a continuation of the quote of these people mocking. *Though you're praying, "Lift up the light of Your countenance upon us, O Lord!" nothing is happening, David! Your troubles are still here! Where is your God now?* Or it may be

David's genuine prayer. **Lift up the light of Your countenance upon us, O Lord!** Either way, it's a prayer the godly pray. We pray for God's favor to come & shine on us. We pray like the priests of the OT who would bless the people of God saying, **The Lord bless you, & keep you; The Lord make His face shine on you, & be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance on you, & give you peace** (Num 6:24-26). Lasting, abiding, calming peace isn't found in understanding what God is doing. Lasting, abiding, calming peace is found in God Himself. This side of eternity we won't fully understand our troubles. There won't always be explanations that make sense to us. But we'll always have the presence of the Lord because He won't leave or forsake us (Heb 13:5).⁴ That's the heart of the godly, desiring the blessing of God, desiring the grace of God, desiring the peace of God, & desiring the comfort of God. & this takes us to our 3rd point. We've seen the cries of anguish, the conduct of the godly, & now we come to the...

3. Comfort of the Lord This Psalm is about finding peace in the midst of the trouble. David now gives a testimony of the peace he's found. **7-8**

David ends with the twin notes of joy & peace. He isn't troubled by sleepless nights. He knows **peace**, *shalom*, which points to a fullness of life & an unshakeable confidence, independent of external circumstances. He lies down unafraid, trusting God. Vs 7 begins with a comparison of David (who has found peace in God) with his enemies (who have not found peace in God). David pictures the days of harvest, when the grain has ripened & all are enjoying the fruit of their labor; when the new wine flows freely & everyone's enjoying it. His testimony is this: *God has given me greater joy than even they have*. Think about the days of harvest in the time of David. For us, we can have fresh fruit every day of the year. Not so for David & those in his day. For them, they could eat fresh fruit only in its season, only at harvest time. The rest of the year they ate preserved food that had been dried or salted. Think about how wonderful that time of year was when they could gorge themselves on fresh fruit & fresh grain & new wine. It doesn't get any better than that. & yet David says, *I have more gladness than they have*. Why? Because God has put it in his heart. The source is God. This isn't a manufactured joy. This isn't a joy through mental gymnastics. This

⁴ Paul David Tripp, https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/1804/sermon_transcript_in_the_cave_and_unafraid.pdf

is God-given joy. God-given joy is vastly more important than all the food the world can give. It's a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) & therefore can't be imitated. Remember David's in distress. His enemies are slandering & mocking him. & David says,

That doesn't matter because I have the fountain of joy that's not dependent on circumstances but upon God who gives me joy even in bad times. I don't need the pleasures of the harvest to have joy. I don't need everything to go well to have joy. I just need God who gives me joy & gladness in spite of circumstances.

Do you have that kind of gladness & joy in the midst of your trying times? Fresh produce is a good gift of God & not to be belittled. Be grateful for it. Just don't trust or find your ultimate joy in it. As Habakkuk 3:17-18 says,

Though the fig tree should not blossom & there be no fruit on the vines, *Though* the yield of the olive should fail & the fields produce no food, *Though* the flock should be cut off from the fold & there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

We must never despise the blessings God gives. What we must guard against is believing the lie that more grain & new wine & your neighbor's car & the newest phone can deliver more joy than Jesus can.⁵ The message trumpeted by the world, the flesh, & the devil is relatively simple. It's packaged in different shapes & sounds but the underlying theme is monotonously the same. *There is more joy in goodies & gold than in Jesus. There is more joy in power & pride than in Jesus. There is more joy in looking fit, feeling good, & the latest fashion than in Jesus.* Store after store, sign after sign, song after song repeat the refrain: *Buy me. Taste mine. Eat this. Drink ours. Smell like us. Wear these clothes. Drive this car. Look like her.* & on & on it goes. Contrary to what the world says, we know there's more joy in Jesus than in all other pleasures combined. The joys of knowing Jesus are incomparable. His capacity to please knows no rival. In the presence of our great God & Savior there is joy that is full, not partial, measured, or parceled out. At His right hand there are eternal pleasures, not the fleeting, momentary sort that promise so much & deliver so little (Ps 16:11). For those of us who know Jesus, this should be the experience of our lives. Peter's message to us is this:

Blessed be the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable & undefiled & will not fade away, reserved in

⁵ Sam Storms, www.samstorms.org/all-articles/post/more-joy--psalm-4:7-

heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise & glory & honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; & though you have not seen Him, you love Him, & though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible & full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls (1 Pt 1:3-9).

After describing the greatness of our salvation, which comes by God's mercy through Jesus (3), which gives an imperishable, undefiled, & unfading inheritance that we look forward to (4), Peter then says we greatly rejoice in our salvation, even when experiencing great trials (6), because, our joy in trials demonstrates our faith to be real & our hope to be secure (7). A grumpy, joyless Christian is an oxymoron. It doesn't fit. When you come to trust Jesus & know the blessings found in Him, the joy is so overwhelming that you can find gladness in all circumstances of life, no matter how bad (Job 1:21). This isn't stoicism or wearing rose-colored glasses. This is genuine, heart-felt, deep-down joy given to us by God which defies all logical explanation. The world understands joy when things go well for you. But the world can't understand David, slandered & opposed, finding more joy than those enjoying the harvest. Do you have this joy? Do you want it? Trust God in the midst of troubling times & it will be yours. David is able to experience joy because as he runs to God, as he worships God in the midst of this trial, it's taught him something profoundly important.

8

In other words, *Father, if You & You alone are the source of my safety, I'm as safe in my bed as I was in the palace. Praise you!* & with that profound thought, David's heart is filled with such peaceful joy that he goes to sleep. David ultimately finds his safety in God. This is enough for him. He has a deep peace despite the circumstances. Faith is confidence in the person of Jesus & in His power, so that even when His power doesn't serve my end, my confidence in Him remains because of who He is.

An example of this is the story of Nicholas Ridley who was a British pastor caught in controversy in England in the 1550s. He was scheduled to be burned at the stake because of his faith. The night before his execution his brother offered to stay with him but Ridley refused. He said he was going to bed & that he was going to sleep as soundly that night as he ever did in his life.

That's exactly what David says here. This is the point: You find peace in times of trouble by trusting the Lord. Despite all his trouble, David finds his rest in God because his security is in God. John

Calvin said, *David enjoys as much security & quiet as if he had been defended by all the garrisons on earth.*⁶ That's the peace we can find in God alone who makes us **dwell in safety**.

Psalms 4 also points us to another King. David's greater Son, Jesus, who is an illustration of the attitude expressed in this psalm. Suffering anxiety about His coming death, Jesus submits to His Father's will in the garden & experiences the peace of mind & joy articulated by vs 8 (Heb 12:2-3).⁷ He, too, left His throne & faced the unthinkable. He didn't just face the threat of death; He was killed & ended up in a grave. But He conquered that grave, defeating sin & death. Jesus has faced & conquered death for you so you'd have, not only eternal life, but so you would have the grace you need in your moment of suffering & difficulty, which brings His peace to you. I ask you, *Have you placed your trust in Jesus?* Maybe some of you have never done that. Maybe you're struggling in your trust of Jesus. Trust in Him. He was willing to die for you. Why? So that in trials you can say, *You have given me a deep-seated joy. In peace, I'll lie down & sleep, for You alone, You alone make me dwell in safety.*

Two quick applications: 1) Realize who you are in Christ. If you're a follower of His, you can have the same confidence that David enjoyed no matter what circumstances you face. You can know that God has set you apart for Himself & that He hears you when you call. This will enable you to know who God is even in the middle of horrible circumstances. You've been purchased by Jesus' blood. He has set you apart. He cares for you. If you don't know God through Jesus Christ, then I encourage you to pursue Him. God invites you to come into a relationship with Him. He's sent His Son to provide the way for this to be possible. Pursue God as He pursues you. 2) Come to God boldly with whatever you're facing. He wants to hear from you. & take confidence from the fact that He does, & then sleep well knowing that God makes you dwell in safety no matter what's going on around you.

⁶ *Commentary on the Psalms*

⁷ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction & Commentary*, pp 67-68

Everything of this earth has passing joy & pleasure. Only the things of God continue to have lasting joy & peace forever. We must make an effort to retrain & renew our minds to seek after the pleasures of God. As we do we'll find that it's these pleasures that give our lives meaning.